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SUBJECT: ROK-JAPAN-CHINA TO HOLD DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER
TRILATERAL ON MAY 19

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On May 15, MOFAT's Asian and Pacific Affairs Deputy Director-General, Cho Yong-chun, told POL M/C that China will host a Deputy Foreign Minister trilateral with ROK and Japanese counterparts on May 19 in Beijing. Cho said this meeting, the first Foreign Ministry senior officials-level dialogue, will discuss enhancing regional political trust and multi-sector cooperation, exchange ideas on regional and international issues, and prepare for a June 3 Foreign Minister trilateral that will be hosted by the ROKG on Cheju Island. Cho said that the ROKG view is that it welcomes trilateral exchanges so long as they do not detract from other relationships, such as those with the United States or ASEAN countries. While the agenda appears relatively vague, it represents increasing efforts among Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing to promote dialogue. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Cho Yong-chun, Deputy Director-General for Asian and Pacific Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, told POL M/C that the ROKG had accepted the Chinese proposal to hold trilateral Deputy Foreign Minister talks in Beijing on May 19. The principals include ROK Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Shim Yoon-joe, Japanese Deputy Minister Yabunaka Mitoji, and Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai. DFM Shim planned to depart for Beijing on May 18 for a trilateral dinner in Beijing, attend trilateral talks on May 19, and return to Seoul on May 20.

ORIGIN IN TRILATERAL SUMMITS

¶3. (C) Cho explained that South Korea, China, and Japan had been holding trilateral presidential summits on the sidelines of ASEAN Plus Three fairly regularly since 1998. The trilateral summits began after the 1997 Asian financial crisis when the capitals saw a need for more frequent consultations. Their agendas were open-ended and touched on issues of the moment.

¶4. (C) Last fall, China proposed senior-level Foreign Ministry talks to complement trilateral summits and existing trilateral Environment Ministry and Finance Ministry discussions. The initial plan is to hold senior-level Foreign Ministry talks annually, or more frequently if needed, that, like the trilateral summits, would have a broad agenda.

15. (C) Cho said that the objectives for the senior-level Foreign Ministry talks are to (1) build political trust; (2) discuss multi-sector cooperation; and (3) cover recent issues. POL M/C asked whether the ROKG intended to raise issues such as Search and Rescue (SAR) operations, especially in the wake of the May 12 incident in which sixteen sailors went missing following a South Korean freighter's collision with a Chinese ship off China's east coast. Cho responded that SAR was more of a bilateral issue and probably was too specific for this round of talks. (NOTE: Cho said that as of May 15, Seoul still had not made a conclusion about the cause of the incident, had heard that the PRC had yet to recover any of the missing sailors, and that the ROKG was planning on sending a survey team to China to investigate. END NOTE.) Likewise, Cho said that history and fishery issues were too detailed to be discussed. Instead, the meeting, the first of its kind, was an opportunity to get the Foreign Ministries involved in trilateral discussions.

16. (C) One issue that might be raised, presuming all three delegations were agreeable, was a general discussion on the DPRK nuclear issue and the DPRK political system, Cho said. The ROKG would not be opposed to a general discussion on the U.S. role in the region or other topics, so long as the focus was not to diminish relations with other countries, such as the United States or ASEAN nations. In fact, Cho said, ASEAN nations had expressed some concern over these increasing "Plus Three" gatherings. Seoul had already assured them that the ROKG did not regard these trilateral gatherings as having any effect on its relationship with ASEAN nations. Cho did not expect a trilateral communique to be issued from the talks, but speculated that the PRC might issue a press release.

FOREIGN MINISTER TRILATERAL ON JUNE 3

17. (C) Cho noted that the ROK will host a June 3 Foreign Minister trilateral on Cheju Island. The agenda and objective of this meeting were under consideration, but Cho expected that the Deputy Foreign Ministers in Beijing would help prepare the ground for the June 3 meeting.

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